Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization

Capital Improvements Database: Tracking Changes Made in Affordable Rental Units

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Conducted on behalf of the Central Community Housing Trust
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Executive Summary

Cataloguing the improvements that a housing developer makes to its properties can prove useful for a number of reasons. From the design perspective, organizing records in this fashion can help the company see which product brands it has favored in the past and which vendors and installers have produced quality materials and workmanship. For budgeting purposes, this tracking system helps the developer anticipate when each product will need to be replaced and how much money to budget for each future improvement.

Access is a very efficient program to use for this type of large project. The database can be designed according to each group's particular needs, but the following is a description of some fundamental ingredients for this type of organization system.

I. Project Goals

Central Community Housing Trust (CCHT) is a non-profit developer of affordable housing, operating 1,112 units in Minneapolis. These units are scattered throughout 20 sites located in the Elliot Park, Stevens Square and Phillips neighborhoods. Until now, CCHT has not had a standard method of recording the improvements that have been made to its buildings. Both the Asset Management Team, which oversees the everyday operations and finances of the apartments, and the Development Team, which designs the plans for new sites, wanted to create a centralized database of the changes that have been made.

Because this research project was initiated by Asset Management, I designed the catalog according to their specifications. I did, however, incorporate a great deal of the Development Team's organization system, and I foresee the database being expanded to encompass improvements that are of more interest to the Development Team.

As it stands now, the database includes information on what Asset Management defines as a **Capital Improvement:**

1. **any product installed in "Common Areas"** (i.e. any part of the building, inside or out, besides the units), **with the exception of certain plumbing and electrical specifics** (pumps, valves, etc…)
2. **any product installed in the units, with the exception of paint and window blinds.**

Asset Management wanted to track the capital improvements in order to determine which of its buildings were due for specific upgrades (new carpet, appliances, etc…), which companies supplied the products and installed them, and what the improvements cost. The Development Team was more interested in the cost and durability of the products so that they could decide whether or not to use them in future apartment designs.

II. Project Phases

After meeting with CCHT staff to determine what information to collect, I began searching for documents that indicated which improvements had been made in each of the 20 sites. My goal was to put all of these files in one centralized location so that CCHT employees could access both the hard copies and the database easily. Pertinent information came from CCHT storage and current files, the offices of its property management companies, and the building sites themselves.

While I was in the "collection phase", I began to brainstorm with the staff about specific elements they wanted to incorporate in the database. We designed the skeleton of the Access file, a brief first draft. As the Development Team was brought in, we decided that the Capital Improvements file should be linked with a large file that had been designed according to the Master Format of the Construction Specifications Institute, the industry standard. A CCHT employee developed this database with help from a computer consultant as the file grew larger and more complicated. We realized that the Capital Improvements file would evolve in the same way. Thus, the database that I designed will be the platform upon which the computer consultant builds the final version.

III. Design

The first draft of the database contained the following pieces of information:

Property Name
Area of Building (Where the improvement was made)
Component (Ex: bath fixtures, lighting, flooring, etc.)
Product Type (Ex: sink faucets, emergency lights, ceramic tile floors. Description of certain components.)
Product Name (Brand Name)
Model Number
How Many Installed?
Vendor (Company that sold the product to CCHT)
Date
Measurement
Manufacturer's Contact Info (Phone Number)
Installer's Contact Info
Warranteed? (Yes/No design)
Years of Warrantee
Cost

After entering some of the information that I had collected, I began to add columns and change existing ones to make certain information easier to understand.

I added columns for:

- **Area Note** - to enter unusual information that did not fit into the standard Area of Building menu (Ex: area of walls below chair rail, North stairs only, etc.)
- **Unit Number**
- **Model Name** - the Model Number category proved to be confusing because most products had both a model name and a number
- **Information Source** (a drop-down menu) and **Location of Source** - in order to let staff know where I had found each product detail
- **Approved By** - to indicate which employee authorized the purchase
- **Comments** – added at the request of the Development Team. This will help staff understand why a particular style or brand of product was chosen and how it performed after installation.
- **Management Company** (a drop-down menu) and **Management Contact** – for the asset Management Team

In addition:

- The staff and I refined the Measurement column to include rough appliance dimensions (ex: 24"stove vs. 19") and boiler capacities (number of BTUs).
- The Cost column had become quite confusing. Some invoices recorded the cost of materials, labor and extras; others included the charge for materials only. To remedy this, I added three yes/no-style columns for **Materials Included, Labor Included** and **Additional Fees Included.** After each of these, I inserted a column for that particular cost category (ex: **Material Cost, Labor Cost**). I then added a **Description of Additional Fees** column.
- I made the Area of Building column a drop-down menu in order to standardize the entries there.
- I changed the Property Name column to a drop-down menu that was a separate table linked to the main database. In the future, the Component and Product Type columns will be separate tables linked to both the Capital Improvements file and the Development Team's product file that I mentioned earlier. This particular change promises to be quite challenging.

These revisions were made in stages as we discovered new types of information and encountered new problems. Different teams offered unique insights on particular issues, and it was important to review the evolving database with several different team members.

IV. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Both the CCHT staff and I learned a great deal from this project. We realized how important it is for a housing developer to organize its design and development

archives clearly (and, preferably, from the beginning) so that future employees can make budgeting plans and design decisions more easily.

I also learned that it is important to inform all stakeholders early in the project's planning stages. Different aspects of the Capital Improvements database are of interest to different staff members, and the project can take on a new direction when everyone's needs are measured.

In the future, I anticipate that the asset Management Team will use the database to help them monitor when to replace specific materials in each of their buildings. Adjusting for inflation, they will estimate the cost of each product one, five and ten years in the future. The Development Team will use the database to critique brands and installers, so that they can make well-informed design decisions for future housing sites.